

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen

1952–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

REPUBLICAN FROM FLORIDA

1989–



Image courtesy of the Member

A CHILDHOOD REFUGEE FROM FIDEL CASTRO'S COMMUNIST REGIME, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen emerged as a powerful voice in her south Florida community and a major critic of the tyrannical regime. Her historic 1989 election to the House of Representatives made her the first Hispanic woman and the first Cuban American elected to the U.S. Congress.

Ileana Ros was born in Havana, Cuba, on July 15, 1952, and moved with her family to the United States shortly after Castro came to power in 1959. After completing public education in Miami-Dade, she earned an associate of arts degree from Miami-Dade Community College in 1972, a B.A. in higher education from Florida International University (FIU) in 1975, and an M.A. in educational leadership from FIU in 1987. In 2004, she received her doctorate in higher education from the University of Miami. She also founded a private elementary school, serving as its chief administrator. From 1982 to 1986, she served as a Republican in the Florida house of representatives (its first Hispanic woman) and, from 1986 to 1989, in the Florida senate. In the state legislature she met and married representative Dexter Lehtinen, who later went on to become the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida. The couple has two daughters, Amanda Michelle and Patricia Marie.

After the death of Congressman Claude Pepper on May 30, 1989, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen sought the Republican nomination for the vacant seat. With the backing of national GOP leaders, she won the August 29, 1989, special election. About 90 percent of the Cuban-American vote (which made up about 40 percent of the district) went to Ros-Lehtinen, who defeated her Democratic rival by a 52 to 48 percent margin. Her victory put the seat in Republican hands for the first time since its creation in 1962.

After Ros-Lehtinen took the oath of office on September 6, 1989, she was assigned to the International Relations and Government Reform committees, where she has served during her nine terms. Recently, Speaker J. Dennis Hastert

of Illinois asked her to serve on the Budget Committee where she was the only Republican woman. In 1990 and 1992, Ros-Lehtinen comfortably won re-election by 60 and 64 percent, respectively.¹ From 1994 to 2000, she was re-elected without opposition. In 2002 and 2004, she won against Democratic candidates with 69 and 65 percent of the vote, respectively. Ros-Lehtinen has chaired several International Relations subcommittees: Africa, International Economic Policy and Trade, International Operations, and Human Rights. Currently, she chairs the Middle East and Central Asia subcommittee. She also served as vice chair of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. In the 109th Congress (2005–2007), she serves on the Government Reform Subcommittee for National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations.

Ros-Lehtinen's leadership in South Florida is well known and has included a number of initiatives providing revenue and jobs for the region, including projects that have shaped local infrastructure and transportation. She has worked tirelessly to bring more than \$25 million in federal funds to revitalize the Miami River, helping to reinvigorate the river area in downtown Miami. She also has secured more than \$40 million to dredge the Port of Miami so that it can serve bigger cruise and freight ships. Ros-Lehtinen has been a strong supporter of expanding Miami International Airport so it can continue to serve a growing south Florida community.

Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen has brought more than \$35 million in federal aid and appropriations into Monroe County since it was added to her district in 2002. That total includes more than \$5 million for the Florida Keys Wastewater Quality Program to ensure that the waters of this marine sanctuary remain healthy—improving the quality of life for the residents and tourists. She also has been a strong champion of affordable housing, fighting to secure higher funding for Section 8, and Housing Opportunities for People With AIDS. Representative Ros-Lehtinen also is a strong supporter of the Everglades cleanup, one of the largest environmental projects in America.

As a Florida certified teacher, Ros-Lehtinen has been a strong supporter of educational reform. While in the Florida senate, she was instrumental in passing the Florida Pre-Paid Program. To this day she continues to speak about the importance of this program to south Florida schools and students.

On the international front, Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen has been a leading advocate for the promotion of human rights in countries like Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China. She also steadfastly supports Israel's right to exist in peace and security as a democratic Jewish state.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Ileana Ros-Lehtinen," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

Fernández, Mayra. *Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Legisladora* (Cleveland, OH: Modern Curriculum Press, 1994).

NOTES

1 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/index.html>.